DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 191 549 PS 011 566

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TITLE Group Skills and Reality Therapy: A Pragmatic Process for Humanizing Education.
PUB DATE [75]
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Communication: *Classroom Techniques: Elementary Secondary Education: *Group Discussion: Group Dynamics: *Humanistic Education: Leadership: *Student Participation: *Teaching Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Glasser (William)

ABSTRACT

While elementary school teachers are concerned for and involved in the affective world of children, some elementary educators fear or distrust group affective approaches. It may be the case that they lack understanding and skills in the use of affective curricula. William Glasser's guides for classroom meetings, designed to increase and promote children's affective involvement with school, their teachers, other children and curriculum-related problem solving activities, require teachers skilled at moderating and facilitating group interaction. Experience at the University of Maine indicates that while educators readily endorse the open-ended, diagnostic and social problem-solving classroom meetings advocated by Glasser, they encounter difficulty in effectively leading groups of 30 or more individuals in free-flowing, face-to-face interaction. Certain basic leadership skills are essential for a teacher to function as an effective group leader. The following few basic techniques will be useful in most classroom discussions. Teachers can moderate and facilitate large group interaction through Tone Setting (teacher models participation), Structuring (teacher defines limits and promotes willingness to contribute), Blocking (teacher impedes individuals or group), Linking (teacher points out similarities and differences), Supporting (teacher provides non-manipulative support for participation). Reflecting (teacher provides feedback), and Questioning. (Author/RH)

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Group Skills and Reality Therapy:

A Pragmatic Process for Humanizing Education

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The modern elementary school educator is concerned for and involved in the affective world of children. This teacher strives to develop in children the ability to handle conflict in socially acceptable ways, resolve personal problems, and eventually shape public policy by participating in intelligent social action, (Palomores, 1974, Banks, 1973).

Numerous approaches have been developed to help the classroom teacher understand and implement a curriculum of affect that will make the inner world of the child at least as important as the cognitive areas of the more traditional systems (Dinkmeyer, 1972; Ojeman and Kremenak, 1968; Raths, Harmin, and Simon, 1966; Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum, 1972; Brown, 1971; Weinstein and Fantini, 1970; Glasser, 1969; Schmuck and Schmuck, 1971). In addition, some associations including the American Association for Humanistic Psychology and the more recently organized Association for Humanistic Education and Development have provided national networks to initiate, nurture, and expand a humanistic viewpoint in the public schools.

In spite of such efforts, some educators fear or distrust group affective approaches because they lack the understanding of or specific training in the skills necessary to use affective curricula.

In recent years, the approach of William Glasser has profoundly influenced the thinking of educators (Glasser, 1965, 1968, 1971, 1976).

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In noting that the individual child seeks a positive identity through the attainment of love and worth, Glasser suggests a class meeting format designed to increase the child's involvement with school, the teacher, and with other children. The outcomes of this process include preparation in learning to think, solving problems, and providing relevance to an oft'time abstract and unrelated curriculum.

Deficits in these areas are demonstrated by a lack of action or by action inappropriate to the desired process. Examples of these deficits are when children blurt out responses not related to the question or topic under consideration; when children are unable to recognize a problem and the processes for its solution; when children constantly resort to manipulative rather than reflective skills; and, when children mentally wander from the central issue and speak to unrelated issues or to themselves.

The use of the classroom meeting necessarily involves the use of group skills in spite of the modern desire for individualization. The fact that humans are social beings has roots in the writing of Aristotle, and most educators would agree that the individual is born into a group, develops through a group, and creates as a member of a group (Beaukenkamp, 1959). The potential advantages of the skillful use of groups has been well documented. Through positive group interactions the child can gain insights into personal developmental concerns, learn to express himself more clearly and discover alternate ways of behavior that will enhance and promote positive self images.

While few would contest the potential of the group to promote positive benefits, the major problem encountered by those who use Glasser's and other group approaches as vehicles to humanism often discover that their professional preparation contained little, if any, direct work in the learning of basic group competencies. Experience at the University of Maine indicates that while educators readily enforce the openended, educational diagnostic, and social problem-solving meetings of Glasser, they encounter difficulty in effectively leading groups of thirty or more individuals in a free flowing, face-to-face interaction. Fearing loss of control or overwhelmed by the seeming complex phenomenon of group dynamics, their initial enthusiasm for Glasser's humanistic principles fades when children test the limits of new and relatively novel situations. Although some teachers are unable to provide the skilled group leadership of the school counselor or social worker, most can master the basic techniques necessary to make the classroom meeting a meaningful, relevant, and involved group activity.

If the teacher as classroom leader can accept Glasser's meeting approach, then the teaching style may change from one of directive authority to one of a guide, moderator or facilitator.

Group Leadership Skills

Certain basic leadership skills are essential to function as an effective group leader. Group leadership styles, like teaching styles, are probably as varied as the individuals who practice them. However, almost

all educators will find that a few basic techniques will be useful in most classrooms. None of these is a panacea for classroom problems, rather each is an avenue to help teachers and students achieve common learning goals.

1. Tone Setting. Many a neophyte teacher is dismayed when a class fails to react to a given topic or area of study with any degree of enthusiasm. The teacher, therefore, may want to guide the tone of a group discussion by offering personal views and reactions to a topic. The teacher should model the participation desired by encouraging opinions, divergent thinking, and affective statements. The teacher must be perceived by the students as "open," "honest" and capable of making mistakes, as a promoter of thinking not just a respository of knowledge.

   The teacher may set the tone by smiling and showing enthusiasm for an act, an idea, or a statement that is only tangentially apropos but offered in a cooperative spirit, or the teacher may move or gesture in a manner to effect the type of tone response desired. To achieve a desired tone, the teacher may have the pupils engage in some type of physical activity which involves everyone, or the teacher might tell a story or play a role to effect desired tone.

2. Structuring. Even those students who are fully aware that the teacher values member to member interaction may need further help as the class progresses. The teacher's task in such situations is essentially one of assisting the class to understand the importance of being ready to share ideas and helping others convey their thoughts and opinions

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within the confines of a safe social setting - the classroom. Early in the year the teacher establishes the importance of social interest and the willingness to give and take. Younger children will require more structure in defining limits and learning skills of group interaction. Obviously the teacher must also be willing to operate in a give and take manner.

3. Blocking. At times the teacher may find it necessary to impede the efforts of an individual or subgroup in order to enhance total group movement. This may be accomplished by simply asking the class to become aware of its own operation. A simple question such as "I wonder what's happening in the group now?" will generally be sufficient for the class to pause and reflect on how and why the behavior of some members is detrimental to the group's goals and progress. Children from kindergarten age can respond knowingly to a question of this nature. This ability grows in effectiveness with the age of the child and it becomes increasingly effective from the third grade. Group consideration of such questions and a review of the topic usually resolves the problem and gets the class back to the topic and operating in a constructive manner.

   If the class cannot see the problem which is blocking progress or if progress is intimidated by unusual student power or if progress is blocked because the class errs in its analysis of the problem, the teacher must clarify the problem through discussion or remove the factor of intimidation by aiding the group to recognize its purpose and so overcome the hurdle. This helps the group members to recognize

the elements of the problem and their relationship to the solution through a valid analysis of the problem. All the problems of the group will be handled within the group and solved by the group with the teacher as an advisor to the group.

4. Linking. At times the teacher may wish to point out the similarities and differences in the feelings and verbalizations of group members. Gordon (1964) describes the linking function as an effort on the part of a group leader to perceive the linkage between separate comments and convey this relationship to the group. For example: Bill: "I don't think that we should be friends with everybody." Mary: "Why not? Everybody needs lots of friends." Teacher: "Bill feels we don't need to be friends with everybody. Mary says we do. I wonder if anyone else in the class has an opinion?" In this instance the teacher "links" or ties together two different opinions and encourages other members of the class to participate through the use of a general linking question. Through the use of the linking process children are aided in the developments of listening skills and seeing relationships among ideas and processes. The ability to "link" is essential to thinking and the linking process is enhanced by improved listening skills. The activities connected with linking provide a subtle, sophisticated process and a discussion approach to the development of cooperative skills in linking and listening skills in children.

5. Support. At times the teacher may wish to support an individual student or group of students, particularly those who have low group status. Support for an individual's opinions or feelings may have to be used frequently with shy or reserved students who are reluctant to participate. Example: "John, I was pleased that your interest in sports was able to help Joe explain his interest in sports."

   The support developed for an individual or a sub-group should be elicited from the totality of the group for the growth and security of the group and each of its members. Any approach employed to organize group support should be constructive in its outlook and in its procedure. Manipulative activities should not be employed for they erode the positive and constructive aspects of supportive action.

6. Reflecting. In order to help an individual or group of individuals feel deeply understood, the teacher may choose to reflect or "feedback" the content and feelings of a verbalization. He serves as a "mirror" for group and individual feelings and is constantly alert to detect those feelings not expressed but implied.

   Mary: "Gee, another project--the third this week.'" Teacher: "You feel I'm asking you for too much?"

7. Questioning. The teacher may at times wish to question an individual or the class as a whole. He may ask a simple general question like "what is happening in the class right now?" -- designed to energize and motivate the group or he may simply be asking for opinions

or clarification. Beginning teachers often tend to hinder class discussion by extensive questioning, a practice that delimits interaction, and hinders cohesion. As with other techniques, questioning strategies are only appropriate when the response is likely to help achieve individual and class goals.

Summary

As a leader of humanistic classroom sessions, the teacher is responsible for developing and maintaining a classroom climate conducive to learning. In order to meet this objective the teacher must be aware of the basic humanistic approaches and have some skill in group leadership. These skills include the leadership techniques of tone setting, structuring, blocking, linking, supporting, reflecting, and questioning.

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